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HURRICANE KATRINA

HON. TOM LANTOS

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, September 7, 2005

Mr. Speaker, the disaster along our Gulf Coast has wrought heartbreaking devastation on a scale too staggering to comprehend. I rise to join my colleagues in extending deepest sympathies to all those who have been struck by this catastrophe. Our hearts go out to all those who are suffering.

First and foremost, we must provide effective and immediate relief to our neighbors who are the victims of this tragedy. Federal authorities must render all assistance necessary in this overwhelming national crisis.

Congress has already taken the needed steps to ensure that funds are available for assistance. This is only the beginning of relief, and when more is needed, we will provide whatever is required.

We in the San Francisco Bay Area know first hand the impact of natural disaster, and we stand ready to help. I am encouraged by the support being shown by people in the Bay Area. Emergency volunteers have been dispatched. Hundreds of survivors will be housed in San Francisco's St. Mary's Cathedral. California schools are opening their doors as well. In my district,

Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont has offered to take in 50 displaced students. The California State Universities, the University of California at Berkeley, and Stanford are accepting others. Many people have given, and will continue to give, to established relief agencies at this critical time.

As the Ranking Member of the House International Relations Committee, I also want to express my deep gratitude and appreciation to our friends in the world community who have pledged to help. Secretary General Kofi Annan has acknowledged American generosity in helping others, and he has graciously offered the assistance of the United Nations in our time of need. The leaders of a broad array of countries have expressed their condolences and extended offers of aid.

All Americans can be proud of the hard and sometime heart-rending work being done by local, state and federal emergency workers now on the scene of the disaster. But it seemed that immediate emergency action arrived in slow motion last week when it was so desperately

needed. Those who were watching the news reports, as well as those who were hurting in the midst of the devastation, were united in one question: Why did the rescue efforts take so long? Now other questions are beginning to arise. We must answer them in order to do better in the event of another emergency. Even the President indicates that the response to this one has been less than acceptable.

When the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was formed in 2002, I voiced concern about folding into it the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). After failing to adequately respond to Hurricane Hugo in 1989 and Hurricane Andrew in 1992, FEMA had reestablished itself as a singularly responsive federal agency by clearly defining its mission and aggressively pursuing it. It was not helpful to change its structure and culture only a few years later in order to fit into the massive and newly created Department.

I believe our primary purpose in establishing the DHS was to better protect the nation through better prevention and response to

catastrophe. We have yet to demonstrate improved prevention, and in this case our response has been pathetically sluggish. Confusion and lack of leadership dominate our efforts. I call on President Bush to take swift action to relieve FEMA Director Michael Brown of his duties.

I also join with Ranking Members Waxman, Oberstar, and Thompson in requesting that the committees of jurisdiction, the Committee on Government Reform, the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and the Committee on Homeland Security, conduct hearings on the questions raised in responding to Hurricane Katrina.

And finally, I advocate the establishment of a blue ribbon, non-partisan committee on the scope and with the clout of the 9-11 Commission to prepare a long-range and thorough investigation into this matter, in order to lay out the lessons learned. We need to find out what went wrong, what went right, and what we can do how we can do to brace for a future disaster. We need to ensure that a similar natural event, or even a major terrorist attack, is not made any worse by our own failure to respond with speed, efficiency, and real compassion rather than rhetoric.

Mr. Speaker, let's work together to help our neighbors and friends whose lives stood in the path of destruction. And let's do a better job of shielding our nation against such events.